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September 2007 Newsletter

Building on Joseph's Model of Market-Bound Colonoware Pottery

By Chris Espenshade*

Recent discussions on the possible mechanisms for whole Colonoware vessels being discovered in the rivers of the South Carolina Lowcountry have identified several options (Ferguson 2007; Espenshade 2007; Joseph 2004, 2007). Joe Joseph recently offered his theory that some of the recovered vessels represent the result of the capsizing of slave canoes on their way to markets. This is an intriguing model, and a testable hypothesis, given appropriate samples.

How can we distinguish market-bound Colonoware from riverside offerings, dock-side loss, or refuse disposal? Given that Colonoware researchers (myself included) are starting to recognize that there was probably not a single mechanism by which all whole Colonoware vessels ended up in rivers (and by which some ended up in terrestrial contexts), it would be good to be able to define expectations for certain mechanisms. This article is a first step in operationalizing Joseph's hypothesis.

The following premises are offered for consideration:

- The Colonoware vessels in a given canoe-load would most likely represent the product of a single potter or a closely related, small group of potters. There should be a high degree of similarity in clay source, tempering practice, firing technology, formal attributes, and stylistic traits. The economies of scale for part-time market potters mean that large lots of clay are gathered at the same time, and large batches of paste are mixed at a given time. This should increase technological homogeneity over that seen in occasional household production for domestic use only.
- As noted by Joseph (2007), if being transported for sale of the vessels proper, the pots should not show signs of prior use. The argument here is that people would not want to buy "used" pots. The pots should lack interior abrasions from stirring, the bowls should lack cut marks from cutlery, and the vessel bases should not show wear consistent with the repeated placement of vessels on sandy, gritty surfaces or in coal beds. The pots should show no evidence of having had closures placed over their mouths. The pots should lack heavy sooting from repeated use over a smoky fire (but they may have firing clouds from their original firing). The assemblage should not include badly spalled or cracked pieces.

- If being transported for sale, the vessels should not contain food or medicine residues in their paste. Dr. Nora Reber, at UNC-Wilmington, is among a group of researchers who have begun to identify pottery use through the macroscopically undetectable residues absorbed into the porous walls of low-fired pottery. Market-bound pieces should not have residues, for example, from a rice-based cuisine common to Lowcountry slaves. As an aside, vessels used in rituals might be expected to have a very restricted range of residues, such that the testing of a number of the marked bowls of suspected ritual origin might allow us to reconstruct portions of a riverside ritual.
- If being transported for sale, there should be statistically identifiable size classes, which formerly corresponded to customers' ideals of a typical bowl, a large cooking pot, etc. As pottery production moved from (i) very occasional potting to supply the immediate needs of family and/or slave village to (ii) more frequent production to produce a marketable surplus, there should be greater consistency in the product and tighter definition of product classes. The more frequently a primitive potter (one not using formal molds or wheel technology) makes pots, the more uniform her pots become. The more pots made in a single production episode, the more uniform the pots will be. Furthermore, the more a potter's product is subjected to market feed-back (i.e., what sells and what doesn't), the more regimented the product becomes. Village Colonoware (to use Joseph's dichotomy) was subjected to limited feed-back, while Market Colonoware had to please the buyers.
- If intended for sale at market, the Colonoware should reflect greater concern with aesthetics than does Village Colonoware. A well-burnished pot is aesthetically pleasing, but is also easier to clean than a smoothed or semi-burnished vessel. However, unless we can sample the coeval Village Colonoware from the source community of the Market Colonoware, it will be difficult to quantify the care with which an assemblage was burnished (although I have been pondering a decidedly high-tech approach to measuring reflectivity as an indication of quality of burnishing).
- If being transported for sale at market, the pots should display traits that make them look more like Euro-American friendly pots. We should expect forms that mimic refined pottery, such as porringers. We should expect traits such as the crimping/notching of bowl and plate rims to mimic European and domestic slipware. In most basic terms, Village Colonoware can function without unnecessary imitation of European forms (e.g., the notching of a bowl rim has no obvious functional advantage when serving stew), but Market Colonoware may benefit in increased sales by resembling more familiar (to the buyer) products.
- If being transported only to contain market goods (fin or shell fish, wild fruit, garden surplus, wild game, etc.), the Colonoware may have been previously used, and may not be as regimented as in the other scenario. If serving as containers, there may have been a preference for larger vessel forms. As well, there may be evidence for closure devices (e.g., wear on the most constricted portion of the neck and on the rim top from the tying of a piece of hide, cloth, or wood to keep the contents in the pot and to keep insects and

other vermin out of the pot). Pots functioning as transport containers may be spalled or cracked, yet still retain their usefulness.

If these premises seem reasonable, the study lacks only a good assemblage (and possibly a graduate student in search of a thesis topic) to address Joseph's theory.

As we gather better riverine and terrestrial assemblages for the Lowcountry, approaches such as those outlined above should allow us to more fully understand the mechanisms of assemblage formation and the role(s) of Colonoware in slave and broader plantation society. Rather than provisionally choosing between ritual (as championed by Ferguson 1992, 1999, 2007), refuse (as argued by Espenshade 2007), or canoe capsize (as posited by Joseph 2004, 2007), we should be able to conduct the appropriate analyses and bring data to bear.

Note

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